

# Charles Bukowski Dies; Poet of L.A.'s Low-Life

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By MYRNA OLIVER  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Charles Bukowski, the prolific writer and poet laureate of Los Angeles low-life whose rough-hewn autobiographical poems, short stories, novels and 1987 film "Barfly" chronicled his hard-bitten alcoholic youth, died Wednesday. He was 73.

Bukowski, a cult favorite in Europe even before he achieved fame at home, died of leukemia at San Pedro Peninsula Hospital, said his wife, Linda.

She said that although he had suffered from the disease for about a year he had worked until recently. A book of his letters titled "Screams From the Balcony" was

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## BUKOWSKI: Poet, Novelist Dies

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published a few months ago, and a new book of poetry, "Pulp," is scheduled to be published in three weeks.

"If I die," he told The Times in an interview in 1987, "I hope I go with my head on that typewriter. It's my battlefield."

Considered the leader of the tough, masculine "Meat School poets," Bukowski reveled in subjects thought best left alone by more genteel contemporaries—sex, violence, alcohol abuse. Yet he wrote and spoke in the sweet, syncopated rhythms that unquestionably are labeled poetry.

"I've been run over, beaten up, jailed—I've picked up a lot of baggage along the way, everything from ex-wives to ex-jobs," he said in 1987 after "Barfly" won him interviews in the national media. "I've always been worried about my damn soul—maybe I worry too much. But you carry in one hand a bundle of darkness that accumulates each day. And when death finally comes, you say right away, 'Hey, buddy, glad to see ya!'"

Surprisingly disciplined and prolific writer in spite of his hard-drinking, womanizing, gambler persona, Bukowski published more than 1,000 poems, 32 books of poetry, five books of short stories, half a dozen novels and the screenplay. More than 2 million copies of his books are in print, most of them translated into languages ranging from French to Greek to Portuguese.

Bukowski's hero frequently was his alter ego Henry Chinaski, a hard-drinking, womanizing, gambling writer who stumbles between bars and odd jobs. Chinaski was played by actor Mickey Rourke in "Barfly," which concentrated on three days in Bukowski's life at the age of 24.

Said to have mellowed in his later years—switching from hard liquor to good red wine and swallowing 40 vitamin pills a day—Bukowski had lived the rough life he so wittingly described.

Born in Andernach, Germany, in 1920, he moved to the United States with his family as a toddler, living first in Baltimore, then Pas-



Los Angeles Times

Charles Bukowski in 1987

adena and eventually Los Angeles. His stern father beat him with a razor strop for even minor infractions, causing such stress that the child developed widespread boils that scarred his complexion for life.

(Writer Paul Ciotti described him in a 1987 Los Angeles Times Magazine article as having "a sandblasted face, warts on his eyelids and a dominating nose that looks as if it was assembled in a junkyard from Studebaker hoods and Buick fenders.")

A small boy, young Bukowski was bullied by other boys and rejected by girls, attracting only what he described as "idiot friends." At age 13, he discovered alcohol—the answer to beatings, boils, and rejection—in the family wine cellar of one of those friends.

"It was magic," he later wrote. "Why hadn't someone told me?"

In 1939, Bukowski enrolled at Los Angeles City College to study journalism and English. But he soon became disillusioned and dropped out, moving to New York and then Philadelphia to become a writer.

Excused from the draft as "too antisocial," he continued writing and collecting rejection slips from Atlantic Monthly and Harper's

magazine until 1946.

Then, in his own words, "I said the hell with it, I'll just concentrate on drinking."

Bukowski spent the next decade on a drunken binge, roaming the country and gathering experience. In 1955, he wound up in County-USC Medical Center with a bleeding ulcer.

"I was supposed to die and didn't," he said later. "So I started writing again. But instead of short stories, it came out as poetry."

His first book of poetry—all 30 pages and 200 copies of it—was "Flower, Fist and Bestial Wail," published in 1959. When "It Catches My Heart in Its Hands: New and Selected Poems, 1955-63" was published in greater quantity in 1963, Bukowski found himself the sought-after darling of underground poetry magazines and local papers like the L.A. Free Press.

How much of Bukowski's harsh manner was mere showmanship—or salesmanship—is uncertain.

He recognized when he began to write that a poet must be noticed in order to be read and later recounted: "I got my act up. I wrote vile but interesting stuff that made people hate me, that made them curious about this Bukowski. I threw bodies off my porch into the night. I sneered at hippies. I was in and out of drunk tanks. A lady accused me of rape."

Bukowski attracted the attention of John Martin, who founded Black Sparrow Press in 1965 specifically to publish him.

As a fledgling writer, Bukowski made little money and continued to work at odd jobs—dishwasher, truck driver, guard, gas station attendant, shipping clerk, parking lot attendant, elevator operator, worker in dog biscuit, cake and cookie factories and, perhaps most permanently, as a mail sorter with the U.S. Postal Service at Terminal Annex in Downtown Los Angeles.

After Martin offered him \$100 a month to quit and write full-time in 1969, Bukowski turned that last experience into his first novel, "Post Office," published in 1971. It

sold 75,000 copies in the United States and 500,000 abroad.

To expand his income, Bukowski wrote for such questionable literary publications as Hustler. He even started a short-lived magazine of his own called "Laugh Literary and Man the Humping Guns," and earned \$200 a night staging raucous poetry readings that often turned into drunken brawls.

Bukowski's titles usually warned unwary readers what to expect. Typical were the short stories "Notes of a Dirty Old Man," based on his underground columns, and "Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness," in which the New York Review of Books noted that Bukowski wrote "as an unregenerate low-brow contemptuous of our claims to superior being."

No experience was lost on Bukowski throughout his life. When he hobnobbed with Rourke, actress Faye Dunaway and other Hollywood celebrities during the making of "Barfly," he turned that into his sixth novel, "Hollywood," published in 1989.

Bukowski's screenplay, like the

rest of his work, offered remarkable insight into life as well as into the author.

"Whatever its flaws," wrote Times film critic Michael Wilmington, "'Barfly' does something more films should do: It opens up territory, opens up a human being. The worst of it has the edge of coughed-up whimsy and barroom bragging. But the best has the shock of truth and the harsh sweet kiss of dreams."

The autobiographical writings eventually attracted biographers.

In 1985, Barbet Schroeder produced a two-hour videotape for French television (later shown here) titled "Charles Bukowski."

And in 1991, Nceli Cherkovski published a biography, "A Tough Guy from L.A.—The Life of Charles Bukowski."

"Bukowski is the possessor of a strong, disturbing voice that has led his ardent admirers to consider his poetry among today's best and to compare his tough-guy prose to that of Ernest Hemingway. Yet he has long been dismissed as only a 'Los Angeles writer,'" noted author and USC teacher John Rechy

in reviewing Cherkovski's book.

"[Bukowski] does not fit neatly within the boundaries of literary acceptability," Rechy said. "Though celebrated abroad, in America his work is still begrudged respectful attention by the tomes that purport to establish literary importance."

If mainstream literature rejected Bukowski, he nevertheless collected such awards as a National Endowment for the Arts grant in 1974, the Loujon Press Award and the Silver Reel Award from the San Francisco Festival of the Arts.

And until the end of his life, Bukowski said it all came easy.

"The wine does most of my writing," he said in his late 60s. "I just open a bottle and turn on the radio, and it just comes pouring out. I only type every third night. I have no plan. My mind is a blank. I sit down. The typewriter gives me things I don't even know I'm working on. It's a free lunch. A free dinner. I don't know how long it is going to continue, but so far there is nothing easier than writing."

In addition to his wife, Bukowski is survived by a daughter, Marina, of Seattle.